



Montana Department of
ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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Marc Racicot, Governor

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LIBBY #2

(406) 444-2544

May 26, 2000



Environmental Protection Agency
Region VIII
Attn: Max Dodson - 8EPR
Assistant Regional Administrator
999 18th Street - Suite 500
Denver, CO 80202-2466

Dear Max:

My staff and I have reviewed the John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center's (Volpe Center) proposed engineering and contaminant removal plans for the former Export Plant (Operable Unit 01) and former Screening Plant (Operable Unit 02), and were particularly disappointed with Section 2.1.2 Disposal at Abandoned Vermiculite Mine. It appears the Volpe Center's recommendation is based more on expediency than on possible long-term environmental benefits.

Basically, the proposal recommends simply placing all the building demolition and soil in a hole and covering it up. The rationale the Volpe Center uses for this option is that the "...aggressive schedule established by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for performing the removal action at the Operable Unit 02 does not include time for conducting this evaluation (engineering evaluation) and related activities."

The Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) believes the soil removed from the former Screening Plant can be used more effectively and economically in reclamation than as fill or cover for a pit. Certainly the long-term environmental benefits greatly outweigh any expediency of simply doing a job quickly.

The DEQ has repeatedly made it known to EPA that the soil from the former Screening Plant could be used as an effective reclamation medium at the mine site. Your staff also was given the name and telephone number of the DEQ person who knows more about reclamation at the mine site than anyone else. Patrick Plantenberg, Operating Permit

Section Supervisor, Environmental Management Bureau (EMB), DEQ, has been associated with reclamation efforts at the mine site for many years. Our suggestions for EPA and its contractors to call him apparently were not taken. Mr. Plantenberg has never been contacted.

The DEQ has proposed using the contaminated soil from the former Screening Plant as cover for a portion of coarse tailings just east of the dam and spillway on Rainy Creek at the mine. Erosion from this oversteepened area allows asbestos to enter surface water, and will require remediation. The asbestos containing tailings provide a marginal growth medium for revegetation, and is not adequate in this area. The soil from the former Screening Plant, even though it contains asbestos containing material, would provide a better medium for revegetation.

The Volpe Center plan contends that a "substantial engineering evaluation" would be necessary to place the soil on the coarse tailings. Mr. Plantenberg disagrees. He believes it would take an engineer about two days to produce a safe, economical, practical plan to dispose of the material. Interestingly, Mr. Plantenberg mentioned that one of the Volpe Center's subcontractors, CDM Federal Programs Corporation (CDM), has an engineer in its Montana office who is a former DEQ person who "...has the expertise to prepare the plan."

If the soil can be placed on the oversteepened area of the coarse tailings safely, economically and practically, is there an imperative reason for the disposal to be done so quickly (once the current owners of the former Screen Plant have been relocated) as to preclude using the contaminated soil to an environmental benefit? Although all the environmental and public health sampling have not been done, analyzed and conclusions drawn, there are enough data to indicate that there are no obviously compelling scientific or technical reasons, that we know of, to demolish the facilities at the former Screen Plant, scrape up the soil and place it in "Hole #23" at the mine site so rapidly as to rule out wisely using the soil.


DEQ disagrees with the Volpe Center's assessment of Section 2.1.2. I would like EPA to further assess that part of the proposed plan and would strongly recommend either EPA or Volpe Center personnel contacting Mr. Plantenberg (406-444-4960 and pplantenberg@state.mt.us) and exploring DEQ's preferred option or any other possible solutions to use the soil for reclamation at the mine.

In closing, Max, the state's repeated suggestion to talk to the most knowledgeable person regarding reclamation at the mine and the apparent decision to ignore that suggestion is another instance in a series of events at Libby where EPA and its contractors are seemingly not interested in coordinating and cooperating with the state. We have the same goals, we just need to put more effort into accomplishing them together.

As you know, I will not be available for the next two weeks, so if you have any questions, please call Tom Ellerhoff (406-444-5263) or send him an e-mail (tellerhoff@state.mt.us).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark A. Simonich", written over a horizontal line.

 Mark A. Simonich
Director

cc: R. Hanmer, Acting Regional Administrator
J. Wardell, MT EPA Office